

PUB
REF
V
1
S4
no. 5
1963

A LETTER

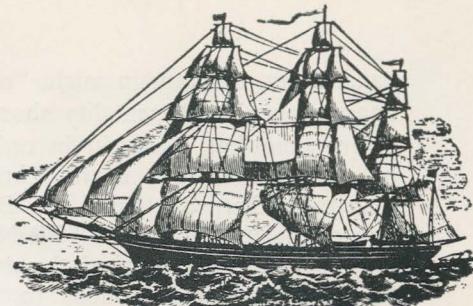
ished by the San Francisco Maritime Museum

I
President

ER

Number Five, 1963

KARL KORTUM
Director



LIBRARY
SAN FRANCISCO MARITIME
NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK

186813

SF Maritime NHP Library



The side-wheel steamer BAY CITY decorated for the Christmas holidays in the 1890's.

WREATHS and ANCHORS, TREES and PLUM DUFF

This issue of SEA LETTER salutes the season with a gathering of photographs of ships decorated for Christmas and notes on other shipboard celebrations. The observance of Christmas with decorations such as those that adorn the BAY CITY is of recent origin, and difficult to achieve aboard a ship at sea, or even one safely at anchor. It is not surprising, then, that we find little mention of such customs for the day in early logs and journals. M. John Sarrauall, a "merchant" passenger on the voyage set out from England by the right honourable Earle of

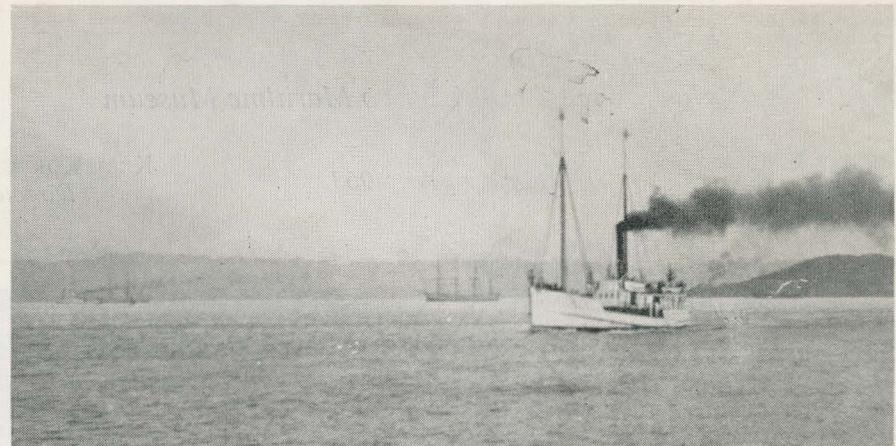
Cumberland "in the yeere 1586" and bound for the South Sea, remarks only the position of the ship and the state of the weather on the "day of the Nativitie of Christ." Columbus did not observe the day at all, according to his biographer Samuel Eliot Morison, who himself does by remarking the absence of "mass or carols" on that first Christmas in the New World. Cook, sailing northwest from the Society Islands in 1777 came to a small island on the 25th day of the twelfth month and bestowed upon it the day's name: we have a Christmas Island. At least, as one jour-

nalist notes, the captain might "with unaccustomed sentimentality shorten down somewhat overnight in order, he said, to give us a restful Christmas." Another, Captain L. E. Bindon of the East Indiaman SERING-APTAM, in 1859 marked the day: "Served out double rations to the crew. Made every person . . . as comfortable as possible." Felix Riesenbergs, in *Under Sail, a Voyage Round Cape Horn*, writes of the ship A. J. FULLER of New York, Captain Charles M. Nichols, bound for Honolulu in December 1897: "All hands on deck for us, me boys!" piped Australia. 'An' the first watch on deck tonight,' chipped in Jimmy Marshall, an' a hell of a Christmas Day."

But for the passengers on Captain John Leale's BAY CITY, the run between San Francisco and Alameda or Oakland was always a pleasant one, and during the holiday season it was enhanced by the captain's customary celebration. In *Recollections of a Tule Sailor*, the Captain notes: "At the Christmas season for some years my boat, then the BAY CITY, had the distinction of being the only ferry-boat decorated. I would secure a car-load or two of greens and Christmas trees from the Santa Cruz Mountains, and day and night just before Christmas, all hands were busy (when possible) in making garlands, wreaths and anchors. She was festooned all around the edge of the hurricane deck, including the paddle-boxes and all around the saloon deck rail and posts, also the main deck posts. There was a six-foot anchor pendent between the forward jack-staffs and the Pilot House, together with wreaths dotted all over the boat."

Captain Leale inaugurated the South Pacific Coast (Narrow Gauge) Service when he took the side-wheel steamer NEWARK across the bay on her first trip in 1878. Soon afterward the company built its second boat, the BAY CITY, which was smaller and handier than the NEWARK.

Among the crew standing on the deck in the photograph may be "Deaf Gus," the pilot; "Young Gus," a deck hand; Olaf; Littlewood, the steward (once Lord Roberts' valet), and "Portuguese Joe." We can only speculate on the engaging personal qualities of a captain who set these hands to "making garlands, wreaths and anchors."



The Steam Schooner POINT ARENA arrives in the Bay decorated with trees

Christmas on the ships of the Redwood Coast . . .

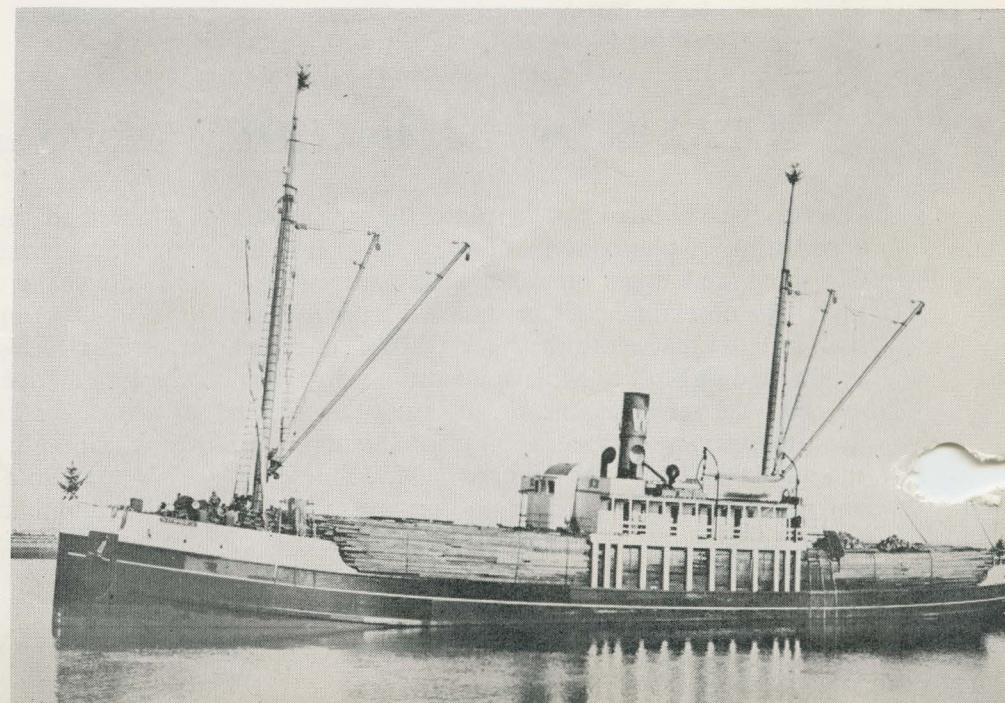
The steam schooners POINT ARENA (above) and SHASTA (below) are of a type developed specifically to load lumber in the doghole ports of the rockbound Mendocino and Sonoma Coasts. The advantage inherent in operating by steam rather than sail in these dangerous inlets led to its introduction at a time when sail was still undisputed on the world's bulk-trade routes.

The first steam schooners were built at San Francisco in 1884; the POINT ARENA was of about average tonnage for the time—223 tons—when she was launched in San Francisco in 1887. The SHASTA, however, of 1907 vintage, was over three times as large.

The photographs show them decked out for Christmas, the green boughs appropriately topping masts of Douglas fir or Humboldt pine. And their observance of the season was not limited to decoration—they might even carry the traditional symbol of festivity to the city from the lumber ports, having for this once in a year cargo that had not first passed through the sawmill.

The son of a steam schooner master recalls: "At Christmas time my father's vessel—he was master of the steam schooner POMA — brought down Christmas trees for everyone. They generally had Christmas trees tied up to each mast . . . There were six children, and during vacation, we all went along on the ship."

The Steam Schooner SHASTA topped with trees





The foc'sle of the TAHOE, Christmas 1908

CHRISTMAS FORWARD . . .

Above: Christmas Day, 1908, on the steam schooner TAHOE — the crew gathers in the decorated foc'sle for this photograph. In the front row, left to right: Charles Hanson, H. A. Pettersson, Bill Jensen and Fred Hawkinson. Rear row, left to right: Harry Mortenson, "Rusty," Fred Christianson, "Russian," Bill Johnson, Max Blitcher and William Henricksen. The TAHOE, wooden steam schooner of 751 tons, was built at the Bendixsen shipyard in 1907. She could carry 775-M feet of lumber from the northern ports.

The photograph can also be seen among the foc'sle displays of the steam schooner WAPAMA, one of the ships in the recently inaugurated San Francisco Maritime State Historical Park at the Hyde Street pier. Readers of the SEA LETTER will recall the museum's efforts in the acquisition and restoration of both the three-masted schooner C. A. THAYER and the WAPAMA. Now open to the public, these ships, along with the walking-beam ferry EUREKA and the scow schooner ALMA, represent a museum achievement in the preservation of Pacific Coast vessels threatened with extinction.

Right: The foc'sle of the FALLS OF CLYDE, Christmas 1916—Cap-

tain Fred Klebingat, then chief mate of the CLYDE, recalls the crew and the photographer, Ernest Aderman, then an A. B.

"Aderman, of course, used flashlight powder for this picture. He usually lit the fuse and sat down if he wanted his own picture taken too. The fuse would delay enough, so that he could do this.

"Several of the faces in the picture I fail to recognize. Herman Wenzke, the sailor with the cigar, is third from left. Next to him at the table with the mug in the hand is Emil Dorsch, pumpman of the FALLS OF CLYDE . . . In front right is Tom Thurstensen, now dead; his brother Barney

was with us too at about the same time. Barney isn't here; he was probably on the wheel

"The camera Aderman used was a Kodak, post-card size. He did his own developing and printing. Printing was done with the aid of the kerosene lamp in the foc'sle of the FALLS OF CLYDE."



Note: FALLS OF CLYDE will be spending this Christmas at her new berth in Honolulu, where she is being restored as a museum ship. The dramatic last-minute rescue of the CLYDE was made possible by the successful fund-raising efforts of John Wright and columnist Bob Krauss in Hawaii, and followed four years of effort on CLYDE's behalf by the San Francisco Maritime Museum, and by Captain Klebingat, the maritime historian Harold Huycke, Robert Weinstein and others concerned with the fate of the last four-masted full-rigged ship in the world. The CLYDE herself once carried cheer to the Islands, as this item from the Hawaii Herald, October 17, 1905, notes:

"The FALLS OF CLYDE expects to return [from San Francisco] with a large cargo of Christmas goods."

The CLYDE had contributed its part to the New Year's celebration for 1905 as well. In the Hilo Tribune for December 27, 1904, we read:

"New Auto Car Arrives—J. Alexander, station agent at Keau, received by ship FALLS OF CLYDE last week a new automobile which will make another added to the list of entries in Admiral Beckley's auto parade on New Year's Day."

The foc'sle of the FALLS OF CLYDE, Christmas 1916



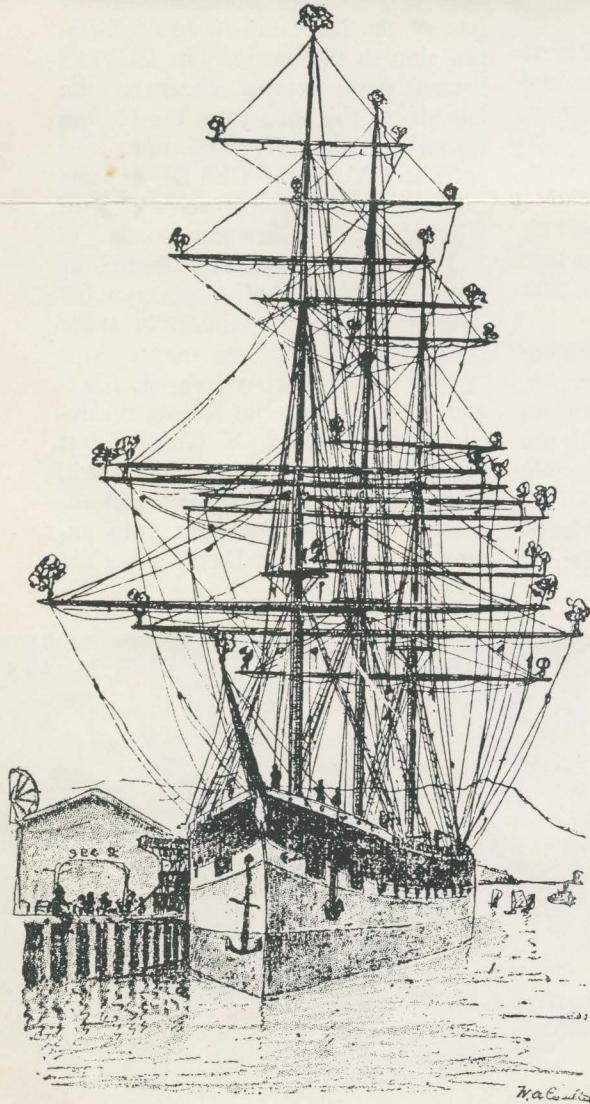
CHRISTMAS AFT...

Christmas 1921 on the schooner MELROSE at Port Angeles. Captain Fred Klebingat, then master of the MELROSE, recalls:

"Besides myself, there's a man by the name of Howard Josh who was running the Charles Nelson Company's launch-towboat in Mukilteo. This picture was taken in Port Angeles, where the schooner was laid up temporarily over Christmas. Josh just happened to be there, and he came on board celebrating. The bottle is pretty empty, so somebody probably went ashore to get another one from the bootlegger. We bought a decoration in the store, and had real tallow on the Christmas tree. We didn't have electric lights. They were scarce in '21.



Captain Fred Klebingat (right) on the schooner MELROSE, 1921



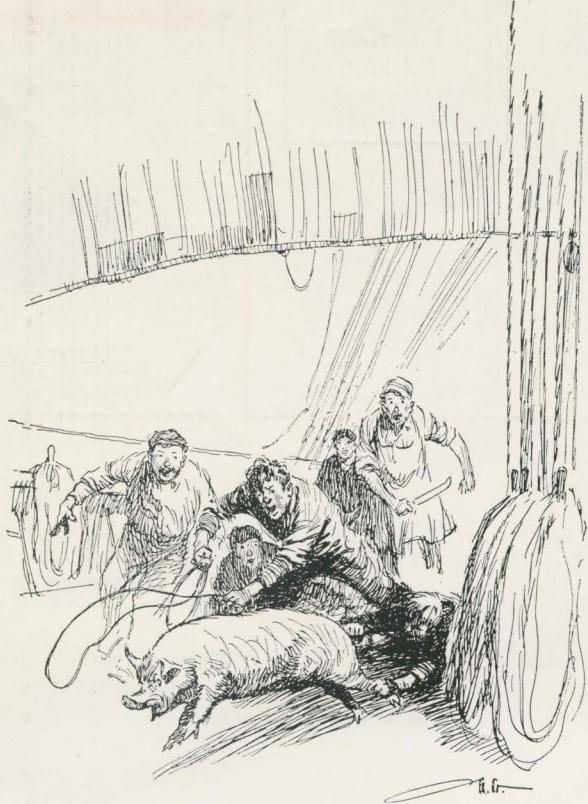
The Holiday on the waterfront, 1898 ...

The drawing at left by William A. Coulter appeared in the San Francisco *Call* on Sunday, January 2, 1898. The ship is more extravagantly decorated than was customary, although Jack Shickell, sailor of the sail and "fancy-work" artist whose ropework adorns the BALCLUTHA, recalls that he "once saw a square rigger on Puget Sound with a Christmas tree mounted at every yardarm!"

Coulter, a marine artist who produced some 5,000 paintings in his sixty years of activity on the West Coast, was staff marine artist for the *Call*, then a morning paper, in the late nineteenth century. He was born in Ireland in 1849, and when he came to San Francisco at the age of twenty, he was already experienced as a deepwater sailor. He painted even while serving as a sailor, using what materials were available on shipboard; his working knowledge of ships at sea accounted for much of his success as a marine painter. Among the Coulter's in the museum's collection is the outstanding oil, *The Arrival of the President Grant*.

BRITISH SHIP KILMORY.

Many of the vessels in port were handsomely decorated yesterday in honor of the new year. The Kilmory easily carried off the palm, however, and much praise was bestowed upon the efforts of Captain Ferguson and his men. Every yard and spar on the ship carried one or more bunches of holly.



Galley offerings at Christmas...

The drawing above appears in *Sail Ho!*, a collection of sketches by Gordon Grant accompanied by brief descriptive passages by C. Fox Smith. Many of the drawings were made aboard BALCLUTHA when she sailed for the Alaska Packers "Star" Fleet as STAR OF ALASKA. It is more than likely that this one was made on one of Grant's passages on the Museum's ship, for STAR OF ALASKA did carry cows and pigs north as part of the provisions for the fisheries. As BALCLUTHA, the ship regularly carried pigs, housed in a pen just forward of the midship house. The following description of "Christmas Dinner" justifies Grant's acknowledgement of C. Fox Smith as one "who does with words what I strive to achieve in paint," catching as it does the sounds of the chase as "at last our Christmas dinner was put to quietude."

"The pig has waxed fat during the voyage and word is passed that roast pork and plum duff will be served on Christmas Day.

The pig (who bears the first mate's name among the crew), in some mysterious fashion senses his doom,

breaks from his pen, and leads a merry chase from end to end of the deck.

Through the galley, the foc'sle, the deck house, the after cabin — he is finally cornered amid a din of squealing, yelling, laughter, and curses.

The cook, despite his claims to being an expert butcher, eventually makes a sorry and sanguinary mess of his job."

The fate of the intended Christmas dinner was less sanguinary aboard the lumber schooner ROBERT LEWERS, as recounted by Captain Otto M. Bratrud in *Beating to Windward*. He joined the ship at Port Gamble, where she loaded part of her cargo and then proceeded to Grays Harbor, where she was to pick up the rest of it. The year is 1902.

"We joined the ROBERT LEWERS a couple of weeks before Christmas. A small suckling pig was destined to be our Christmas dinner. He became such a pet, however, even sleeping in our bunks occasionally, that when his day came, we interceded for him and ate plain meat that day instead of suckling pig."

Continued on page 6

"Jottings" from the cabin on Christmas

Notes on the solitary splendor of Christmas aft, and of less splendid ones at sea, can be found in *Jottings from a Cruise*, by Captain Alfred J. Green, Master Mariner, being "experiences recorded by him on the ill-fated voyage of the bark MERTOLA." The jottings which follow are for 1889, the ship at anchor off Fernandina in St. Mary's River, Florida.

"Christmas Day. What a variety of queer Christmas Days can an old 'deep water' sailor recall? How one was spent among the icebergs off Cape Horn, momentary fear of collision added to bitter blustering weather, and not a dry rag to shift with. How another was dragged through on the safest half of a stranded wreck, with a morsel of raw salt meat and a bite of sodden biscuit for the banquet. Yet another—perhaps half-a-score of such—sweltering in a calm on the Line, all the old-world associations of the day turned topsy turvey . . . The sort of Christmas Day I have just spent has been something like what falls to the lot of friendless old bachelors in easy circumstances. The turkey was there, excellently cooked by our new steward; so also was the regulation plum pudding; but alas! for the atmosphere of home . . . In the morning I was wished the "Compliments of the season" by my mates, and I cordially wished them the same. Then we sat down to breakfast, lamenting the wet fog that prevented us from hoisting our flags in honour of the day. After breakfast I saw that the steward was preparing a good dinner for the sailors, and then plunged into neglected arrears of correspondence. When dinner time came at one o'clock, the sailors sat down to a roast sirloin of beef, with a broad range of vegetables, followed by the same quality of plum pudding we had in the cabin; we three waifs aft, to the aforesaid turkey and sundry other good things . . . Dinner over, as the fog had cleared away, I let the mates go on shore together, for a ramble, while I read, wrote and dozed in my cabin . . . And so the afternoon waxed and waned into night and here I am at eight p.m., chronicling the above exciting items of my Christmas Day at Fernandina."

SAN FRANCISCO

Maritime Museum

FOOT OF POLK STREET
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

RETURN GUARANTEED

Galley offerings ...

Other notes on galley offerings of the day:
"An' we dined 'andsome, so we did, off biscuits an'
salt horse,
An' finished up with scraper duff
an' sand-an' canvas source."

—From "Bill's Christmases" in *Sea Songs and Ballads, 1917-22* by C. Fox Smith.

Duff, a mixture of flour and water, with raisins added (plum or lum duff) figures prominently in most menus. It is a sea tradition to serve this dish on Thursday, when no meat was served, but it seldom seems welcome on a day of festivity, however small. A sailor sourly notes on a December 25th that fell on a Thursday: "Cakes for tea, duff not good." It was dished up to the crew of the ship DOVENBY in South Australian waters, where the temperature in the shade was 125 degrees on a Christmas Day at the turn of the century. We have this account from *White Sails and Spindrift* by Captain Frank Hubert Shaw:

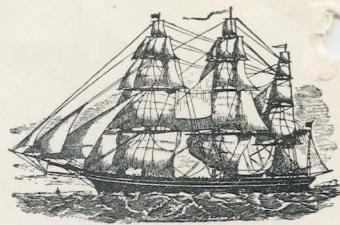
"The cook and steward of the DOVENBY were Tories of the bluest school. Christmas to them meant Christmas dinner. Consequently big dishes of greasy roast pork, with plentiful sage stuffing—onions galore mixed in—were served to all hands; plus baked potatoes and such desiccated vegetables as were obtainable. Thick, fatty plum-duff followed."

Bernard Gilboy chose a simpler menu on his unprecedented lone "voyage of pleasure" from San Francisco to Australia in his 18-foot boat PACIFIC. Christmas Day, 1882: "I had beef and alcohol straight, with water."

Bill Bartz, manager of the BALCLUTHA, ships a tree that is illuminated at night at the tip of the jibboom. The museum ship has also sprouted trees atop the main mast and on the fore yardarms. They symbolize the San Francisco Maritime Museum's greetings to you:
The cheer of the holiday season,
and a happy New Year.

Non-Profit
Organization
U. S. POSTAGE
PAID
San Francisco, Calif.
Permit No. 7496

SEA LETTER



ANITA VENTURA, *Editor*

This Christmas on the BALCLUTHA ...



Photograph by Karl Kortum